

# Early Brethren History

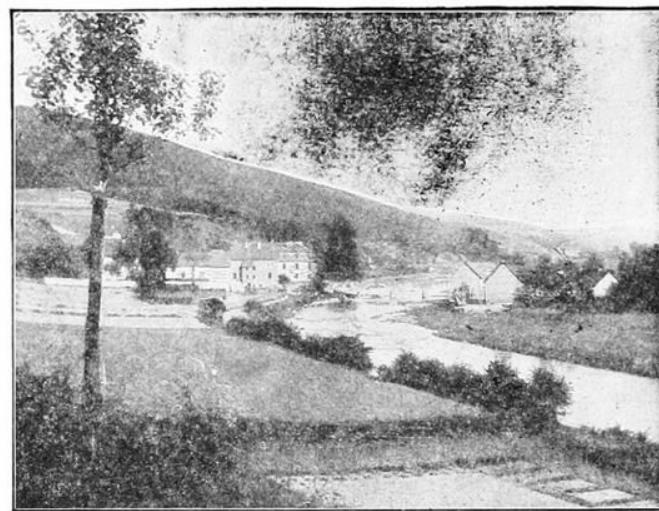
By DR. ALVA J. MCCLAIN  
*The Brethren Missionary Herald*

## Historical Background

It is an axiom of Church History that every decline of Christian faith is followed by a reaction back toward the truth. The Dark Ages were followed by the Protestant Reformation. And, second in importance, in the judgment of many historians, was the Pietist movement which followed the decline of the Reformation. By some it is called the "Second Reformation."

Pietism arose in the 17th Century as the reaction of a living practical Christian faith against that dead orthodoxy which was too often satisfied with mere theoretical correctness of creed. It did not underestimate the importance of correct belief, but insisted that all true Christian faith must issue in true Christian living. The first Pietists, under the leadership of the great Spencer, were intensely anticlerical, advocated a democratic form of church government, insisted that ministerial students should be trained in godly living and practical methods of preaching, and organized popular classes for definite study of the Bible.

Without any organization, the movement quickly spread throughout Europe, and although the object of persecution by both Protestants and Catholics in many localities, exercised a profoundly beneficial influence upon the Reformed and Lutheran churches. It brought back the tide of spirituality in Protestantism which was fast becoming cold



SCENE OF FIRST BRETHREN BAPTISMS

The Eider River, at Schwarzenau, Germany, near Mack's mill, where the first eight Brethren were baptized by trine immersion in obedience to the Great Commission.

and formal. According to Fisher, eminent church historian, the first real impetus toward missionary endeavor in the Protestant churches came from the Pietists. Count Zinzendorf, great missionary leader of the Moravian Church, owed much to their influence.

## Historical Origin

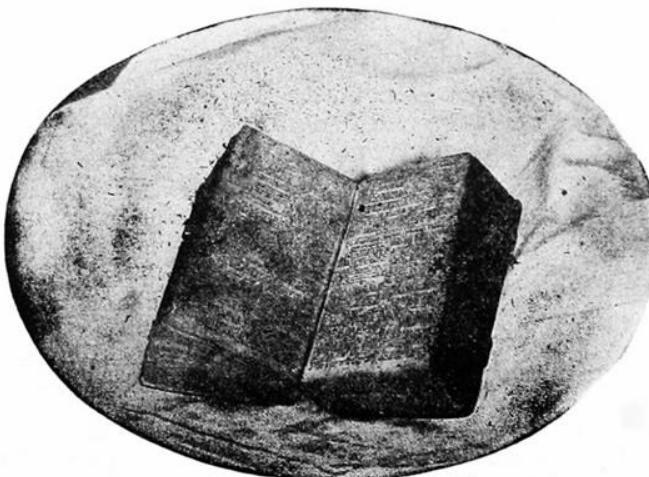
The Brethren Church, as a definite organization, sprang directly from this great Pietist movement. At the beginning of the 18th Century, a little company of devout Pietists, under the leadership of Alexander Mack, was gathered together in the village of Schwarzenau, Germany, for the study of the Word of God. As a result of their study, they were led to enter a solemn covenant with one another to forsake the worldly,

formal religion of the day, and to return to the apostolic faith and practice down to the minutest detail, as revealed in the New Testament. One beautiful morning in the summer of 1708, with the Great Commission of our Lord in Matthew 28:19, 20 open before them, this band of eight believers repaired to the River Eider (probably near Mack's mill, as he was a miller) for baptism "into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit"—and thus revived in Protestantism the ancient form of trine immersion.

Desiring to prevent the exaltation of any one man as the founder of the organization, lots were cast to determine who should perform the first baptism. The identity of the person was never revealed. Hollsinger, historian of the Brethren, describes the scene at the River Eider: "We positively know that it was not Alexander Mack who performed the first baptism among the Tunkers (German, *dippers*, so-called because of the dipping in baptism); it may have been George Greby, Lucas Fetter, Andrew Boney, or John Kipping. Having arrived at the water's edge, and prayer offered and a blessing for each invoked from kind heaven, he who had been selected by lot took Alexander Mack by the hand, and both went down into the water, and after Mack had knelt down in the water, he was baptized, face forward, 'into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the

## MACK'S OPEN BIBLE

It was the study of this Bible that led the early Brethren to separate themselves from formal religion, and to establish a church whose motto was to be "The Bible, the Whole Bible, and Nothing but the Bible."



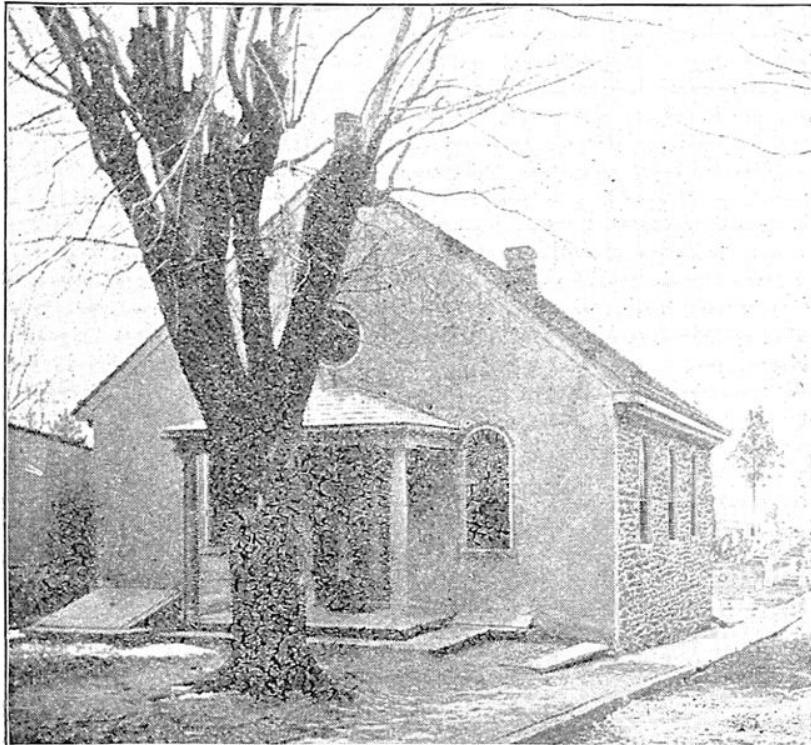
Holy Spirit,' according to the commission of the Great Commander. Then returning to the shore, Alexander Mack, who had been chosen their minister, took him, by whom he had just been baptized, and, leading him into the stream, baptized him in the same manner, and afterwards the other six also."

#### *Emigration to America*

Thus began the visible organization of that group of Christian believers known as "The Brethren Church." A rapid increase in numbers made them the object of determined persecution by both Catholics and the State Church. While preaching in Holland, Mack met William Penn, who offered the Brethren a refuge from persecution in his new colony in America. The invitation of the great-hearted Quaker was accepted. In 1719 the Brethren began their emigration, and within a decade the entire group had settled in Germantown and Philadelphia. On Germantown Avenue, above Sharpnack Street, a little stone church still stands and is used for worship—the oldest Brethren church in America. Back of the church is a quiet, peaceful spot, "God's Acre," where rests the dust of Alexander Mack and others of the Brethren, waiting the resurrection of the "dead in Christ" and the meeting in the air.

#### MACK'S GRAVE

"Back of the church is a quiet, peaceful spot, 'God's Acre,' where rests the dust of Alexander Mack and others of the Brethren, waiting the resurrection of the 'dead in Christ' and the meeting in the air."



OLD GERMANTOWN CHURCH: On Germantown Avenue, Philadelphia, Pa., the oldest Brethren church in America (remodeled and enlarged since this photo was taken).

#### *Contribution to Christian Thought and Life*

Although one of the smaller Protestant groups, the Brethren have made important contributions to the best values in American life. They have consistently opposed war and particularly the use of force in matters of religion. They have insisted holy living is the only valid evidence of Christian faith. They advocate entire separation of church and state. They were leaders in the fight against great social evils such as slavery and intemperance. One hundred years before Lincoln, it was one of the Brethren who published the first anti-slavery pamphlet, and no member of the church ever owned a slave. From its beginning, the church has denounced the traffic in liquor, and refused to tolerate as members those engaged in it. The first Bible printed in America came from the press of Christopher Sower, a Brethren. The first Sunday school in America was held in a Brethren church, antedating the work of Robert Raikes by thirty years.